A Handbook

CREDIBILITY BY DESIGN

INTENTIONAL STEPS TO BUILD LASTING TRUST

Barb Monson

Founder & Principal

MOVE YOUR MOUNTAIN ADVISORY

Table of Contents

The Concept of Credibility 2

The ALIGN Framework 3-4

Part 1: Awareness 5

Leadership Style 6-8

Final Step in “Awareness” Phase 9

Part 2: Leverage 10-15

Final Steps in “Leverage” Phase 16

Part 3: Integration Phase 17-20

Final Phases: Growth and Navigation 21

Next Steps 22

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The Concept of Credibility

Title and tenure don't automatically earn trust. You can likely think of someone you've worked for that had the title, but still created an environment where trust was low, OR you were micromanaged as if you couldn't be trusted.

If you've ever watched The Office, you can see how Michael Scott had the title, and while his character evolved over time, trust was not something he easily gained from his team. (Well, except Dwight.)

Ted Lasso, on the other hand, earned trust rather quickly, even without what appeared to be the "right" credentials.

Every situation is as different as the personalities involved. This handbook will cover steps you can take to build trust within your team, what to look for first, and how to respond when your first attempts don't quite land.

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The ALIGN Framework

Credibility isn't something you're given, it's something you build, on purpose, one step at a time. ALIGN is a framework for doing that on purpose instead of by accident.

ALIGN stands for Awareness, Leverage, Integration, Growth, and Navigation, five steps a leader moves through, not five topics to read about.

You start by looking inward, at your own tendencies and blind spots. Then you look outward, at what your team already has to work with. Only then do you act, testing a real change in a real moment.

After that, you diagnose what actually happened. And you keep adjusting, because trust isn't a milestone you reach once, it's a condition you maintain. Each step depends on the one before it.

Skip ahead, and the change you make won't hold, because it was never built on anything solid. Move through it in order, and credibility stops being something that happens to you. It becomes something you're actively making.

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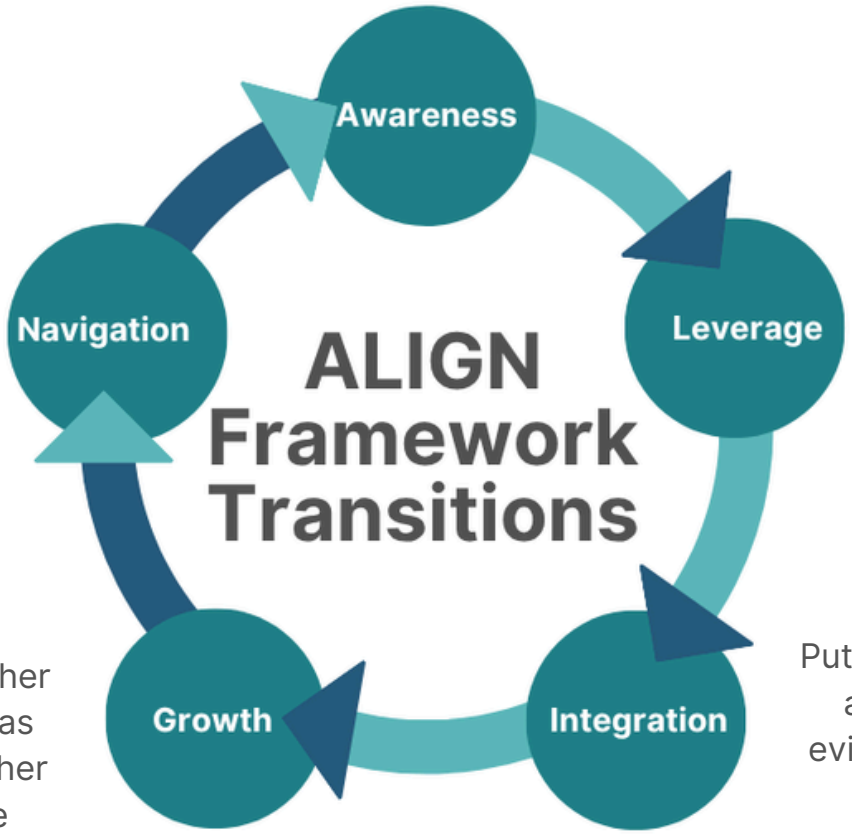
The ALIGN Framework (cont'd)

This handbook will walk through each step of the ALIGN framework, enabling you to move through the phases at the pace you and your team need. It's an iterative process that you are always refining.

Surfaces your own tendencies, style, and blind spots.



Looks at your team with that same clear eye, then turns it into a plan.

Puts the plan into action and generates real evidence to learn from.

Diagnoses whether the outcome was about you, another person, or the situation, and what that reveals.

Updates strategies and techniques while continuing to assess and respond.

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Part 1: Awareness

Awareness starts with self, not the team. That comes later, in Leverage.

What Awareness Covers

- Your tendencies: what you default to under pressure
- Your values: what you actually prioritize when it counts
- Your communication patterns: how you come across, not just what you intend
- Your blind spots: the gap between how you see yourself and how others experience you

Even without direct reporting authority, you are still leading, and it's important to understand your own leadership style.

Before identifying your own preferred style(s) - yes, you likely have more than one - it's important to note that styles are not good or bad. They may be more or less effective depending on the company culture, the department, the project, or the individual.

Next we'll walk through the map of leadership styles and then you can take an assessment to determine what your preferred and/or dominant styles are.

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Leadership Style

Style	How it sounds
Authoritative	"Do as I say." Tends to be commanding. Relies on hierarchy. More ineffective across generations, but can be appropriate for situations where urgent decisions are needed, you have the most knowledge, and there isn't time to get others up to speed.
Visionary	"Let's go this way." Also operates in confident authority, but compels others to want to follow. They set the vision and expectations, explain why, and engage others.
Grinding	"Do as I do." Driven, high expectations. Expects team to also be highly driven. Can be effective short-term for launches, big deadlines, but causes team burnout when it's the default.
Democratic	"What do you think?" Openly shares in formation, seems team input. Can spark creativity, trust, and buy-in, but can slow progress when leader doesn't take authority and everything is decision by committee.
Coaching	"Consider this." Sees individual's potential beyond daily tasks. Provides development opportunities and gives ongoing feedback.
Affiliative	"People first." Prioritizes individual needs. Gets personal and shows interest, creating harmony and collaboration. Can struggle giving constructive feedback or setting firm expectations.
Hands-Off	"Everything's fine." Pays little attention to individual needs. Shows great trust in others, but can fail to provide adequate direction or feedback. Effective with highly skilled self-starters.

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Leadership Style (cont'd)

Ask yourself:

- Which styles and characteristics are most natural for you?
- Which styles and characteristics have you observed and admired in others?
- Which styles and characteristics produce the results you most want?
- Which styles and characteristics does the job require?

To find your blended leadership style, click the link below to take a brief quiz:

- Must be logged into Google to open this Google Sheet
- It opens as a copy - save it for yourself and rename with today's date
- Go to Tab #1 "Leadership Style Quiz"
- Enter your score 1-10: 6 items in each category
- The sheet will tally your results

https://bit.ly/4xNvbSO

(keep this file open - you'll complete additonal exercises on subsequent tabs)

Then continue onto the next page to plot your results.

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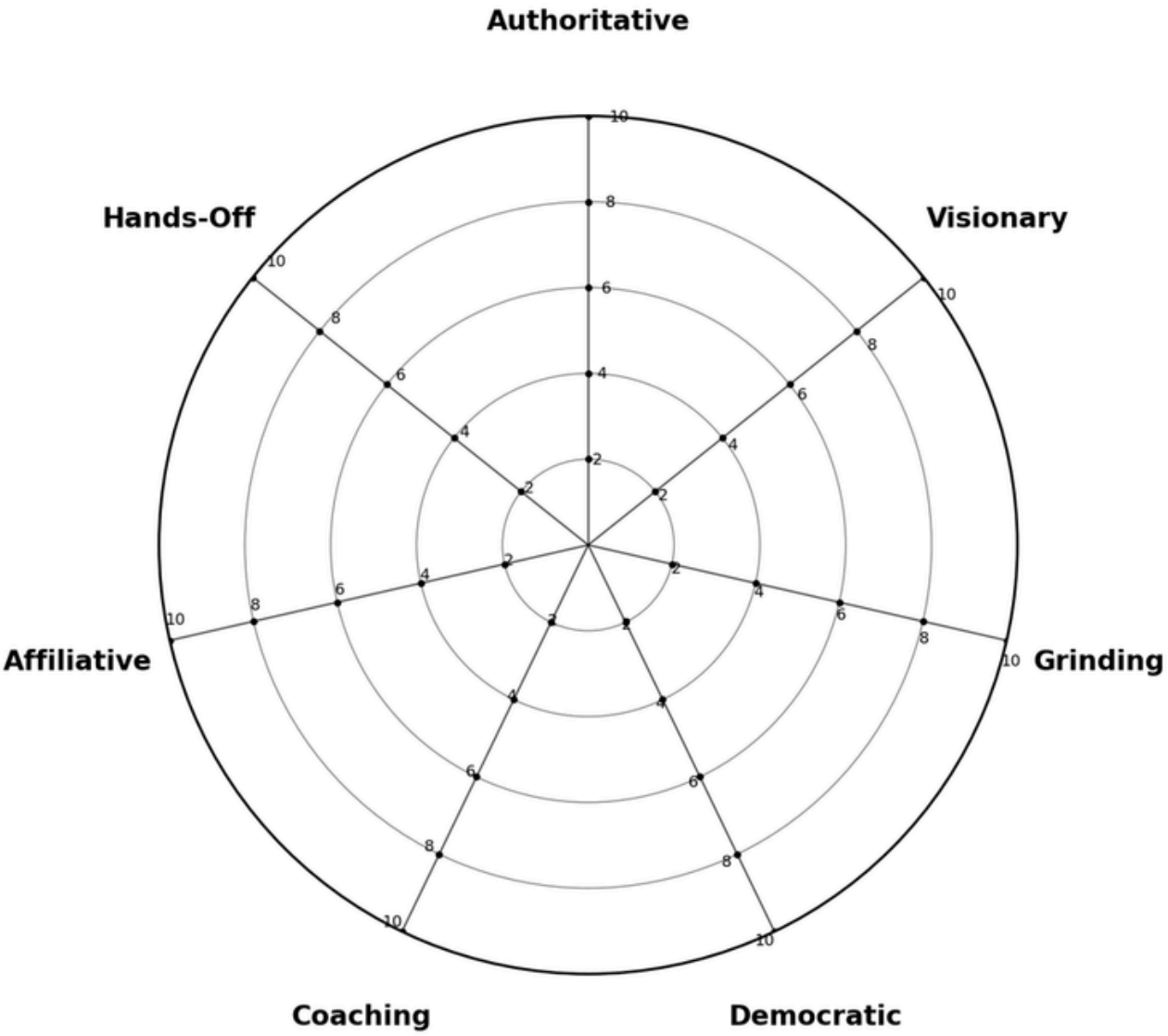
Leadership Style (cont'd)

Plot your results on this wheel.

Note: Your wheel isn't meant to be round. The spikes are where you naturally lead from.



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Final Step in “Awareness” Phase

We are preparing to move into to the Leverage phase, which is focused on your team. One last step in Awareness:

Think about your team and go to the second tab in the exercise file https://bit.ly/4xNvbSO and fill out the following:



Once you know what you’re aiming for and your blended leadership style, you’re ready to look at your team.

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Part 2: Leverage

The second step in the ALIGN framework is Leverage. Now that you are self-aware, you are prepared to look at your team and discern how to tap into talent that's already there, and where you might need to make modifications.

Changes shouldn't be hasty, or you erode trust. Think of it like learning to drive. You start in a parking lot, move to neighborhood streets, then city streets, and only then merge onto the highway.



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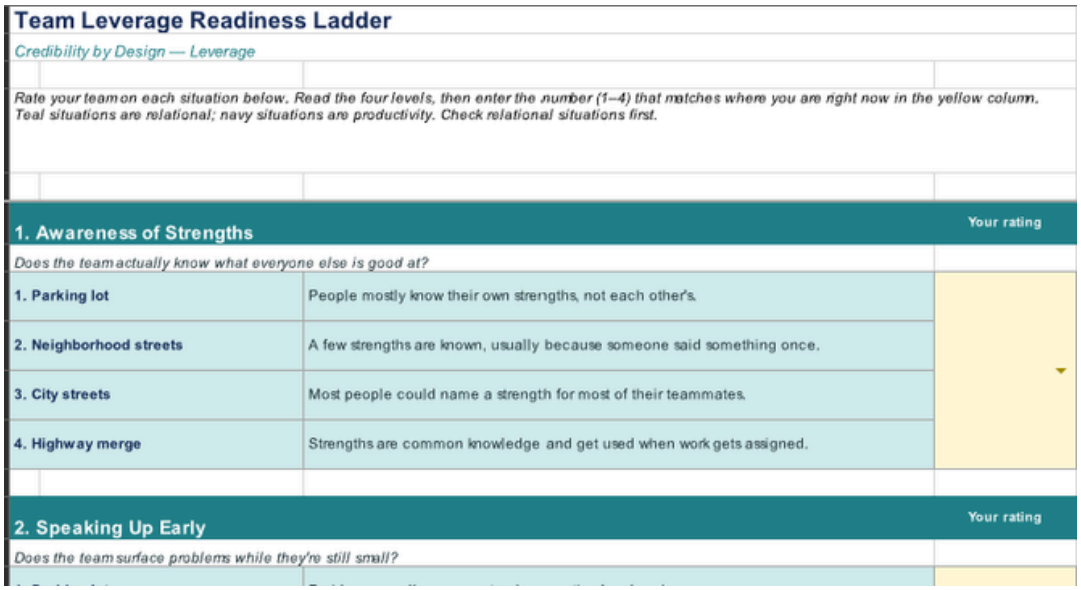
Leverage (cont'd)

In your next exercise you'll identify your team's readiness for leadership adjustment across five areas:

- Awareness of Strengths *(Relational)*
- Speaking Up Early *(Relational)*
- Follow-Through *(Relational)*
- Talent Placement *(Productivity)*
- Backup and Cross-Training *(Productivity)*

Go to tab #3 in the exercise file https://bit.ly/4xNvbSO and fill out the Team Leverage Readiness Ladder. It looks like this:



Team Leverage Readiness Ladder

Credibility by Design — Leverage

Rate your team on each situation below. Read the four levels, then enter the number (1–4) that matches where you are right now in the yellow column. Teal situations are relational; navy situations are productivity. Check relational situations first.

1. Awareness of Strengths		Your rating
Does the team actually know what everyone else is good at?		
1. Parking lot	People mostly know their own strengths, not each other's.	
2. Neighborhood streets	A few strengths are known, usually because someone said something once.	
3. City streets	Most people could name a strength for most of their teammates.	
4. Highway merge	Strengths are common knowledge and get used when work gets assigned.	

2. Speaking Up Early		Your rating
Does the team surface problems while they're still small?		

The exercise will automatically compute your zone overall (parking lot, neighborhood street, etc.)

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Leverage (cont'd)

What does your zone mean?

Average score	What it means
1.0 – 1.9 Parking lot zone	Stay in Leverage. Making changes now, before the team knows itself, risks trust instead of building it.
2.0 – 2.9 Neighborhood streets zone	You're building. Pick one or two of the weakest areas and work on those before integrating bigger change.
3.0 – 3.9 City streets zone	You're close. Small, well-placed changes can work now. Save bigger ones for when you're consistently here.
4.0 Highway merge zone	The team is ready. Integration will land as intentional, not disruptive.

There is no "bad zone." It's just information to give you a starting place.

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Leverage (cont'd)

If you are in the Parking Lot Zone:

Don't rush to make changes. Build the foundation first.

Situation	Do this
Talent Placement	Build a real list of who's doing what right now, and what you actually know about what they're good at.
Awareness of Strengths	In a regular team meeting, have each person name one thing they're proud of from recent work.
Backup and Cross-Training	Identify your single points of failure. Which roles have zero backup right now.
Speaking Up Early	Go first. Name a small mistake or concern out loud in a meeting yourself.
Follow-Through	Start tracking commitments somewhere visible to the team.

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Leverage (cont'd)

Neighborhood Streets? Pick One, Not Five

You have enough foundation. Now pick one thing.

- You have some foundation built now. The goal is precision, not volume.
- Take your lowest relational rung and work only that one.
- Resist fixing everything you just discovered at once.

City Streets? Room to Move

Small changes can land now, in more than one place.

- The floor is solid enough that a change won't read as random.
- You can work more than one situation at a time if it makes sense.
- Save the biggest swings for once you're consistently here.

Highway Merge? You're Ready

Integration will read as intentional, not disruptive.

- The team has enough consistency that a visible change will register as deliberate.
- You're not proving the floor exists anymore. You're building on it.
- Move to Integration.

One rung done well beats five rungs half-attempted.

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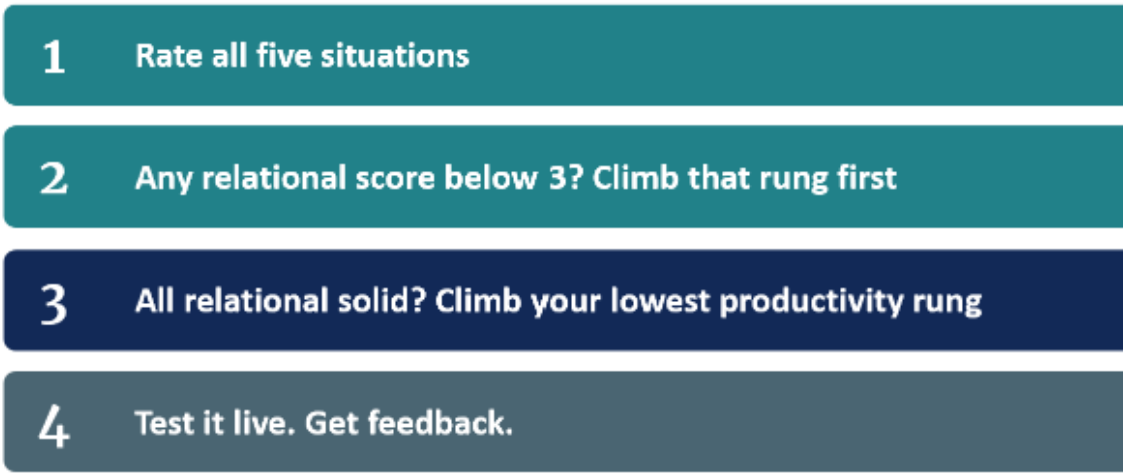
Leverage (cont'd)

Which Rung Should You Climb?

Check relational rungs first, even if a productivity gap looks worse. A productivity fix built on a shaky relationship doesn't hold.



What to watch for in your relational ratings:

- Notice who talks, and who gets interrupted.
- Notice who never speaks up at all.
- Notice who listens: active body language, affirming others.
- Don't make everyone think on the spot. Some people need time to prepare an idea.

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Final Steps in “Leverage” Phase

Consider: Which Leadership Style Would Help?

The rung is WHAT you’re changing, the style is HOW you change it.

- Pull out your Leadership Style Wheel and look at the rung you just identified.
- Which of your seven styles, comfortable or not, would actually help here?
- You don't have to pick your highest score. Sometimes the right style is the one you don't lean on yet.
- This is the style you'll practice in the Integration phase.

Find Your Potential Blind Spots

Before you climb ladder rungs, check whether you are part of the environment.

Go to tab #4 in the exercise file https://bit.ly/4xNvbSO and answer the reflection questions honestly.

Now it’s time for Integration.

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Part 3: Integration Phase

You know your own tendencies. You know where trust sits on your team. Integration is where you test the changes you've identified.

What happens when you integrate?

- Most of the time, a change lands fine. Maybe a few bumps, nothing dramatic.
- You keep testing, keep adjusting, keep climbing the ladder.
- Eventually, one of them creates real conflict. That's not failure, that's just what happens when a change meets people.

What kind of conflict is it?

Task-Focused	Personal
• Disagreement on ideas or execution	• Unproductive, passive-aggressive
• Represents healthy diversity	• Settling scores, not solving problems
• Not meant to be resolved	• Sometimes starts as task-focused
• Be concerned if you DON'T have this	• MUST be resolved

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Integration Phase (cont'd)

Resolving Personal Conflict:

Understand the behavior. Let them describe what happened first, before anyone assigns meaning to it.

Understand the emotion. Use the format "this happened, then I felt this," not "you made me feel this." The second version triggers defensiveness before the conversation even starts.

Suggest other actions, together. Both people collaborate on what changes. Then agree on a warning signal, a phrase either person can use if the same behavior slips back in, since habits don't break in one conversation.

Document it. Confirm in writing. Not as a paper trail against anyone, just so no one relies on memory of what was agreed to.

Bonus Tips:

- Keep it neutral
- Don't play favorites
- Be firm
- Have zero tolerance for toxicity, regardless of their performance

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Integration Phase (cont'd)

Integration is your final exercise using the digital file.

Go to tab #5 in the exercise file https://bit.ly/4xNvbSO and answer the reflection questions honestly under "Jot It Down."

This is where we put the pieces together. After identifying a situation, move to "Rework Your Situation." This will help resolve integration issues without reacting or defaulting to a style that may not support the situation.

Handling Pushback - What if the conflict isn't between others?

When you're the one making the change, sometimes it creates pushback toward you rather than conflict between others. Your first reaction usually matches your dominant leadership style.

The following page highlights some leadership styles that may be more helpful in different situations.

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Integration Phase (cont'd)

Your style	Your instinct under pushback	Try instead
Authoritative	Defend the decision harder. Restate it without new reasoning.	Coaching — ask what's actually driving their concern.
Visionary	Re-explain the vision, assuming they haven't caught up yet.	Democratic — ask what would need to be true for them.
Grinding	Work harder. Prove it by outworking the doubt.	Affiliative — check in on how it's landing personally.
Democratic	Reopen the decision for more input, even though it's made.	Authoritative — hold the decision. It's not up for a vote.
Coaching	Ask questions, trying to coach them into agreement.	Grinding — model the change yourself and let that convince.
Affiliative	Soften or delay the change to avoid the discomfort.	Authoritative — hold the line, even though it's uncomfortable.
Hands-Off	Go quiet. Disengage. Hope the pushback fades.	Visionary — re-explain the bigger picture instead of withdrawing.

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Final Phases:
Growth and Navigation

This handbook described in overwhelming detail a number of scenarios and strategies. In reality, building credibility and strengthening your team takes time, all while still ensuring the work gets done.

The first 3 phases showed you how to identify where to start, but it's not the finish line. The final stages create a cycle that you repeat.

GROWTH: After integration, this is your time to pause and see what worked, and what caused friction. Even if you chose the right rung and adapted your style, things may not have worked as anticipated. Use the growth phase to determine what to keep and what to change.

NAVIGATION: This is another integration phase after you've paused. Hopefully your reflection caused growth, and now you are ready to implement some tweaks.

Reuse the digital exercise file and rename copies with the new date so you can see your progress over time, and to keep a record of what is working and what isn't.

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Next Steps

You know your leadership style now. You know where your team stands. That's the floor, not the ceiling.

The hardest part of this work often isn't the framework. It's applying it when you don't have the title to back you up. If you're leading people who don't report to you, the rules change. What works with direct authority can backfire without it.

Leading Without Authority is a digital handbook that walks through delegating, communicating, and handling performance issues when you can't rely on the org chart to do the work for you.

$49. Available here → https://barbmonson.gumroad.com/l/leading-without-authority

Thank you!

Barb Monson, Founder and Principal
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